

Men on Women

I was giddy walking into Jordan Wolfson's installation, (*Female figure*) (2014), at The Broad. The uniquely grotesque and uncanny piece dances hypnotically between reality and fantasy. The viewer becomes the voyeur: acutely aware of the act of viewing and objectifying. The figure looks you in the eye while speaking, almost convincing you that she is conscious of the whole affair until we remember she is the construction of a human being and not one herself. I reminded myself that Wolfson is a white man who created this piece to, among other things, "[challenge] the ways women are represented, and the ways images of women are consumed."¹

Strangely, the piece was installed just off a gallery full of vividly colored Cindy Sherman photographs—the curators clearly juxtaposed these two installations to emphasize the dialogue around femininity as commodity and objectification of the female body. My main question is: what is a male perspective on female representation adding to the dialogue? While (*Female figure*) has a grotesque, witch-like mask, she still has sexualized features, is clad in sheer lingerie, and looks questionably dirty and tattered. The positioning of Wolfson's piece alongside Sherman's work only accentuated the gap between their gendered perspectives.

In summer 2018, an exhibition by Tom Wesselmann at Gagosian featured paintings that arranged female breasts amongst consumer goods such as a flower vase, a picture frame, and a cigarette. Wesselmann's work trivialized the female body as if another object available for purchase

and consumption alongside the other quotidian objects. Other male artists traffic in lewd representations of the female form as well: Alex Becerra, Max Maslansky, and Henry Taylor (to name a few).

This brings up a similar online debate from earlier in 2018, sparked by Hilde Lynn Helphenstein's critique of Jansson Stegner's sold-out exhibition, which featured sexualized paintings of traditionally beautiful women literally lying in wait. In a much-viewed Facebook post, Helphenstein called out what no one else dared to: the financial support of work that objectifies women exposes a wide-spread admiration of male-centric capitalism and a huge gender disparity in the contemporary market.

Judy Chicago, provocative as always, also accurately reminds readers that "the human psyche is not politically correct. It is full of unpleasant feelings because we're all brought up in a patriarchal, sexist, misogynist society."² What, then, do these depictions ultimately say about us as a culture and artistic community and how might we ever break free of this patriarchal, sexist, misogynist society? Does veering toward objectification make the male perspective on the female body less valid than a female view? Or as Chicago posits, do these representations simply point out the inevitability of female objectification?

There is substantial work still to be done, and the entirety of the art community could benefit from taking a more critical eye towards our industry's treatment of vulnerable bodies.

Geena Brown

1. "Jordan Wolfson's (*Female figure*)," The Broad, <https://www.thebroad.org/art/featured-artworks/jordan-wolfsons-female-figure>.

2. Molly Langmuir and Michael Slenske, "Who's Afraid of the Female Nude?" *New York Magazine*, April 2018, <<https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/can-a-male-artist-still-paint-a-female-nude.html>>.